

PE teacher: It's all about kids health

By Katya Lezin

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Andrew Cambuzzi, 41, has taught Physical Education at Crestdale Middle School since it first opened 15 years ago.

Armed with a 2008 master's degree in Health and Physical Education from Wingate University and National Board certification in 2009, Cambuzzi is transforming not only his school's PE curriculum, but the county's as well.

Last summer, he taught his system for teaching PE to large groups of students (he and Neil Gerspach, Crestdale's other PE teacher, instruct more than 900 students) to the Charlotte Mecklenburg middle school district.

As Crestdale's athletic director, Cambuzzi oversees the school's sports activities and teams. He also serves as the head football and track coach and is a member of the school's Health Team, Bullying Committee, and Student Recognition Committee.

But it is his role as the department head of Crestdale's Physical Education Department that has him convinced he is changing lives because he considers PE to be the most important class in his students' schedule.

"I understand the value of the core classes" he says, "but a healthy body equals a healthy mind."

It is a lesson Cambuzzi learned the hard way.

His father, a former athlete, died at the age of 65 because, as Cambuzzi puts it, "he let himself go and had bad eating habits."

Cambuzzi is determined not to let any of his middle school students develop similar bad habits.

"I look at education as a Y," Cambuzzi said.

In elementary school, the students are at the base of the Y, and all they want to do is do well. By high school, the kids have either gone right or wrong, on either trajectory of the Y.

"But in middle school," Cambuzzi says, "teachers have an opportunity to influence which way the kids

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go.”

He uses PE as a forum for teaching Crestdale’s students about healthy living and providing them with the tools they need to make good choices and good decisions.

His classes, each of which consists of a quarter of the grade at a time, are structured.

His secret weapon is music.

“I burn tons of CDs,” he says, “and we do everything to music.”

The students learn to be active while the music is playing, doing warm ups and fitness stations, and to rotate during the 17-second silences that Cambruzzi includes at regular intervals in all of his CDs

His PE classes also include homework assignments, many of which are interactive. Students are assigned to go on a technology-free walk with their parents and are then asked to write about their experience.

Or the assignment might be to plan a healthy meal, prepare it, share it with their families, and then clean up.

“As far as objectives, grades and measurements,” Cambruzzi says, “we are looking more and more like the regular classes.”

In turn, Cambruzzi credits the entire school community with helping “turn it around as far as kids’ healthy lifestyles.” He points to the healthier school lunches, the requirement that students go outside regularly, and the fact that teachers no longer give out candy and cake as rewards as evidence that “we are now on an upward swing.”

As a parent (he and wife Jennifer have three children, Caroline, 10, Cate, 8 and Colt, 4), Cambruzzi knows how important it is to stay active.

“If you don’t have your health,” he says, “what do you have?”

Katya Lezin is a freelance writer. Do you have a story idea for Katya? Email her at bowserwoof@mindspring.com.



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